

FOCUS ON Travel

THE PULSE

The high seas are getting safer, but piracy persists. Armed robbery against commercial ships declined 27% from 2000 to 2001, dropping from 447 to 325 incidents.

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION

Kids Take the Plunge

Scuba can be great on a family vacation, but beginning at which age?

BY DEBRA A. KLEIN

THOUGH SHE APPLIED SUN-screen on a Belize family dive trip, Susan Keller was still burning up. There she was on the beach playing sitter to her kids, while the rest of the adults were exploring the depths of the Caribbean. It wasn't until Keller returned home to Dayton, Ohio, that she figured out a solution. Ten-year-old Samantha Keller, already an avid snorkeler, enrolled in the new Seal Team instructional program at a local dive shop. For 10 months, she's been practicing pool-based dive skills. If she qualifies, Samantha will be able to don a tank and a wet suit with her family next month in the Bahamas. Her younger brother, Phillip, is also at it. He started on a scubalike snorkeling system when he turned 5. "Before it was, what attraction can we go drive to?" says Susan Keller. "Now it's, where can we dive?"

Boomer parents have long been fond of getting their kids to ski, hike and engage in adventure activities. Scuba Kids are the next wave. The largest scuba-certification group—PADI (the Professional Association of Diving Instructors)—reports that scuba certifications for children 10 to 14 are up, unlike nearly all other age categories. Two years ago PADI and Scuba Schools International (SSI) lowered age restrictions, introducing pool-based programs for kids as young as 8 and clearing 10-year-olds for ocean diving (with a guardian). The previous cutoff for such certifications was 12.

Manufacturers are responding with scaled-down, lighter equipment. Sales for kids' gear start at about \$600 a set and are up 20 percent over last year. Resorts from



Eight-year-old Davis Hasson explores the deep, in the ocean off Grand Cayman Island

the Bahamas to Hawaii are retraining employees and adding courses and scubalike options to teach the young.

Wayne Hasson invented SASY—Supplied Air Snorkeling for Youth—several years ago to let his 5- and 7-year-olds easily grasp simple diving concepts. Kids wear air regulators, hoses and tanks filled with 45 minutes' worth of air. They check their gauges the way divers do, and use masks

for a taste of scuba. There's one catch: their BCs—that's buoyancy compensators for you landlubbers—won't let them sink. SASY units cost \$500 apiece.

When they outgrow SASY, kids can enroll in pool-based programs designed to prepare them for junior open-water certifications that—after written and water certification—allow them to dive with a certified instructor or parent down to 40 feet.

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COURTESY OF WAYNE HASSON

PADI's Drew Richardson says water activities present an alternative for kids who don't excel at other sports. "Scuba is non-competitive," he says. "You don't have to be exceptionally fit or the fastest." But you do have to be aware of your surroundings and react within a split second.

The National Association of Underwater Instructors, the second largest international dive-certification organization, decided not to lower its scuba threshold. "There is a law of readiness," says NAUI's Jed Livingstone. "Kids tend to be exuberant, emotional, feeling invincible." The risks are great, including the changes in lung pressure that descending even a few feet can produce. Moreover, dive tables that dictate the safe rate of ascent were not designed for kids. Dr. Kelly Hill, a diving specialist, worries that nitrogen bubbles in the body's cells can bind to the edges of growth plates in children and inhibit normal growth.

Still, there are parents who believe kids are naturals at sea. Jean-Michel Cousteau knows something about family scuba. He's been diving since he was 7 and took his own son under at 4. His Fiji resort uses SASY and other kid-friendly gear. "We

How to Get Started

There are various pool-based instructional scuba programs for children 8 and up:

Bubblemakers: Offers basics for swimmers. For locations, check out padi.com.

Seal Team: The next PADI step for kids. More information at padisealteam.com.

Scuba Rangers: From SSI. An alternative to PADI's Seal Team. See scubarangers.com.

spend nine months of our life in liquid," he says. "We are used to it."

Diving also seems to inspire kids' environmental sensibilities. Allie Blodinger, 15, a ninth grader in Broward County, Fla., who just learned to scuba with her father, Barry, an accountant, last July, has already cleaned up fishing lines underwater in the Florida Keys and plans to volunteer as a do-good diver again later this year. She always picks up rusted cans and other "gunk" when diving. She says, "It's the right thing to do." Like most young divers, Allie has always felt comfortable in water and appreciates the sense of feeling "like you're going into space." "When I was little, we used to hold our breath playing Little Mermaid in a friend's pool until we turned blue," Allie recalls. And now—with scuba—she can stay under the sea as long as she wants. ■



Remembering the Heroes

Europe's WWII battlefields draw a new generation

BY WILLIAM UNDERHILL

IT'S LATE AFTERNOON, AND THE gates of the U.S. military cemetery in tiny Luxembourg should soon be closing. But superintendent Leland Atkinson is reluctant to call it a day. The 50-acre site is still busy with visitors. Some are strolling among the 5,036 graves, laid out in ranks of parade-ground precision along the manicured lawns. Others are searching for the names of relations listed on the giant stone slabs that record details of American servicemen missing in action during the fierce fighting of the last winter of World War II. Small knots gather at the grave of Gen. George Patton, who commanded the U.S. Third Army during the Battle of the Bulge, which raged nearby.

The guns fell silent long ago, but interest in World War II remains strong. The Luxembourg cemetery, maintained by the American Battle Monuments Commission, attracts some 150,000 visitors each year. At all its 17 burial grounds in Europe, the commission estimates that 3.2 million visited last year, up 30 percent since 1998, with Americans probably accounting for around a quarter of that. "A few years ago, we were saying all this would quiet down as the veterans died off," says Walter Frankland, who heads the commission. "That just isn't happening."

By some counts, American veterans are now dying at the rate of 5,000 a week.

But some still make the pilgrimage to Europe. Their children and grandchildren also come, as a way of educating the next generation. "There is a lot of emotion," says James Dickey, a retired U.S. general who runs a battlefield-tour business from Paris. "Every veteran knows it's a matter of luck who survived and who didn't." Germans come, too. For pathos, it's hard to match Luxembourg's austere German war cemetery, where almost half the 10,915 bodies lie in a single communal grave.

Topping the visitor lists are the Normandy beachheads, where the American cemetery at Omaha Beach—the last resting place for 9,386 servicemen—lies on the actual battlefield. But the whole course of the Allied advance into Germany is rich with history. Luxembourg alone boasts not only museums dedicated to Patton and the Battle of the Bulge, but just across the Belgian border there's the small town of Bastogne, where the U.S. 101st Airborne Division checked Hitler's last great offensive. The Bastogne Historical Center offers a film account of the battle using newsreels from both sides.

Gratitude and patriotism are part of why people visit—especially since 9-11. On one afternoon, Willie Benton was leading a tourist group from the Hawaii Air National Guard at the American Memorial at Bastogne. "This," he says, "is a time to reflect on what we do and why we do it. We have been passed the baton." ■



An American cemetery on the Normandy coast and (top) a marker at the historic landing site